[Matt Henson]

Theodore Poston

MATT HENSON RETIRES (He Was There When)

Source: Personal Observation

N. Y. Post(my story)

Examination of Henson's Files 1938-9

There was little work that morning in the Chief Clerk's Office of the U. S. Custom House. The whole staff was gathered, for the last time, around the desk of the genial and unassuming little man who had worked there for 23 years. For Matt Henson, sole survivor of Peary's dash to the North Pole, was retiring from government service that day—on a clerk's pension.

A few reporters had dropped in to record the occasion. Friends from Harlem and other parts of the city had come down also. One by one they assured the bald headed but erect one-time explorer that they would continue the fight for Congressional recognition of his deed. And Matt Henson thanked them and turned to bid the staff farewell.

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The reporters asked questions. Reluctantly, Henson answered. He displayed no bitterness against a government which had heaped undying honors on the late Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary and completely ignored the only other American to reach the pole. Of the proposed Congressional pension, repeatedly denied him, he said:

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“I could use the money. I think that I deserve it. But I will never ask the government nor anybody else for anything. I have worked sixty of the seventy years of my life, so I guess I can make out on the $87.27 a month pension I've earned here.”

Negro leaders had not been so philosophical however. For a quarter of a century they had demanded official recognition and a commensurate pension for Mr. Henson. Through their efforts six bills had been introduced in Congress. All died in committee.

Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell resurrected the fight in 1935. Scores of prominent Negroes appeared before the House committee to support the bill which asked for a gold medal and a $2,500 pension. They pointed out that the late Rear Admiral Peary had been awarded a $6,500 pension and a Congressional medal. They recalled that Henson had twice saved Peary's life. They charged that Henson's race was his only barrier to recognition.

The House passed the bill. The Senate killed it.

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At the prompting of the reporters, Matt Henson again described their arrival at the North Pole on April 6, 1909, the culmination of a nineteen-year struggle on their part. Together he and Peary had made eight expeditions into the artic regions, and five unsuccessful dashes for the pole. Twice a helpless Peary had been brought back to civilization by his Negro companion—once when his feet were frozen and again when he was stricken by pneumonia.

For the last time in the Custom House surroundings, Mr. Henson recalled the climax of the final dash which had started July 8, 1908.

As trail breaker for the party which included the two Americans and four Eskimos, the Negro had been the first to arrive at the pole.

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“When the compass started to go crazy,” he recalled, “I sat down to wait for Mr. Peary. He arrived about forty-five minutes later, and we prepared to wait for the dawn to check our exact positions. Mr. Peary pulled off his boots and warmed his feet on my stomach. We always did that before going to bed up there.”

The next morning when their positions had been verified, Peary said: “Matt, we've reached the North Pole at last.”

With his exhausted leader looking on, Henson planted the American flag in the barren area.

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“That was the happiest moment of my life.” Mr. Henson said.

Henson's early life fitted him admirably for the hardships he was to undergo with Peary. Born in Charles County, Maryland, in 1866, he was orphaned at the age of four. When he was nine, he ran away from his foster parents and signed up as a cabin boy on the old sailing vessel Katie Hines. A few years later, the Katie Hines was ice-bound for several months in the Baltic Sea.

“That was my first experience with bitter cold, he recalled, “and it sure came in handy later.”

Peary met Henson in 1887 when the latter was working in a store in Washington. Informed of the youth's love of travel, the explorer offered him a job on a surveying expedition in South America. Henson accepted and for twenty-two years, the two men were never separated.

Criticized for taking a Negro with him on his dash to the pole (his critics held that he was afraid that a white man might steal some of his prestige), Peary once said:

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“Matt was a better man than any of my white assistants. He made all our sleds. He was popular with the Eskimos. He could talk their language like a native. He was the greatest man living for handling dogs. I couldn't get along without him.

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Despite this tribute, however, and a glowing forward to Henson's book, “Negro Explorer at the North Pole,”, Peary never publicly joined the forces which fought for Congressional recognition of his Negro assistant, Henson recalled.

“Mr. Peary was a hard man like that.” the assistant said, “He didn't want to share his honor and his glory with anybody. He wanted everything for himself and his family. So, according to his lights, I guess he felt justified.”

The Chief Clerk came over and shook his hand, his fellow workers gathered around to present him with several small mementos, and Matt Henson bade his friends farewell.

When he walked from the room, he had ended the only recognition the government had given him for his deed. For President Taft had appointed him a clerk in the Customs Service for life.